



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on March 20, 2012

Report Cards: More Than Half of State Govts. Receive Failing Grade

In new study by the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) evaluating every state government in America, New Jersey was the rather surprising winner with the top grade of B+. No state received an A. The ratings were based on 14 areas: access to information, campaign finance, budgeting practices, executive accountability, legislative accountability, judicial accountability, civil service systems, procurement practices, pension management, auditing practices, lobbying restrictions, insurance commissions, state government ethics, and redistricting.



New Jersey officials attributed their top rating to the many changes instituted following decades of government scandals. Governor Chris Christie, whose career was built on the prosecution of public corruption, was pleased with the grade. Michael Drewniak of the Garden State's governor's office observed,

It's nice to be recognized for being ahead of the curve. The governor is proud of the changes he's made and the resources he's made available to the public in terms of government transparency. Government operates and behaves better when it's open and transparent, and taxpayers feel informed and a part of the process when they can see how their money is spent, who is getting contracts and who's on the payroll and such.

The Center for Public Integrity's Caitlin Ginley pointed out:

It's telling that no state received an overall grade of A. In every state, there's room to improve the ethics laws, the level of transparency on government proceedings, the disclosure of information, and — most importantly — the oversight of these laws. One of the major findings was that even when ethics laws are passed, they are difficult to enforce and lack meaningful consequences for violators.

Connecticut came next with a B grade, then Washington State, California, and Nebraska all received a B-. Less than half the 50 states earned a C or higher, and eight states outright flunked: North Dakota, Michigan, South Carolina, Maine, Virginia, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Georgia.

Analysts have noted that some areas of public integrity can be misleading. As one example, a civil service system which makes it difficult for political officials to fire state employees is considered evidence of public integrity, while a large percentage of state employees who are in the "unclassified" area of state employment — who serve at will — is considered a problem. In practice, however, when state elected officials have little practical control over state employees, then citizen unhappiness with state agency incompetence may go unaddressed.

Redistricting, also, is an area in which the removal of that political function from state legislatures to



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so-called “independent” commissions may simply shift the accountability for redistricting decisions from elected officials to unelected (and largely unknown) individuals.

Many observers believe that one of the main potential sources of government corruption is public-employees unions. Teachers’ unions which elect their own bosses, as well as other public-employee unions which effectively own the politicians who determine what the union contracts will provide, do not normally fall under the category of public integrity. This explains why California — which is effectively bankrupt because of public-employee union contracts which cannot reasonably be paid — is listed by the CPI among the five states with the highest levels of public integrity. It also explains why Wisconsin — where Democrat state Senators actually fled the state to avoid a quorum in the Senate, and a supreme court justice was almost defeated because public-employee union members felt that he might have ruled to limit their right to bargain for benefits — is also not listed among the worst in public integrity systems.

Constitutionalists know that the best guarantee of good government is to reduce its size and power, at both the state and federal level, thus lessening the reasons for anyone to contribute large amounts to political campaigns or to provide elected officials with all sorts of gifts. As long as California, for instance, spends close to half a trillion dollars a year, many groups of its citizens will voice strident opinions on how that money is allocated.

Map: New Jersey counties



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